

Writing Center Resources

Working with Second Language Writers

A Brief Guide

Resident/L1.5 Students have lived in an English-dominant society for a number of years and acquired English primarily through spoken interactions.

International/L2 Students have traveled from countries around the world to study in the United States (or another country) with official permission from the government in the form of a student visa.

Characteristics of Second-language Students

L1.5 Writers	L2 Writers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often called “ear learners” because much of their language is learned through immersion in English-speaking environments.• May have had limited or interrupted schooling, and may only speak their first language at home with family.• May not know formal grammar rules, although they may have an intuitive sense of “what sounds right.”• May have a conversational style of writing.• May be able to interact with ease, understanding informal spoken language and speaking without an accent.• May be familiar with U.S. culture and understand slang/pop culture references.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often called “eye learners” because their knowledge of English has come primarily through textbook study in a foreign language classroom setting.• May know and understand the formal rules of English grammar.• May be very skilled at taking language tests and reading.• May be unfamiliar with U.S. forms of writing and may have been taught very different patterns of organization and development.• May have difficulty with listening and oral communication.• May lack an understanding of U.S. culture and idioms.

Common ESL Errors

Macro-level Issues	Micro-Level Issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disordered paragraphs• Lack of transitions between ideas• Unclear controlling idea• Vague introductions and conclusions• Lack of focus/digressions• Confused word order at the sentence level	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missing definite or indefinite articles• Ambiguous prepositions• Incorrect use of infinitives• Subject/verb agreement• Inappropriate verb tense and forms• Active and Passive voice• Sentence structure/ boundaries• Disordered modifiers• Stylistic choices/ idioms

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Strategies/ Tips for ESL Conferences

- **Remember that working with ESL students is very similar to working with native English speakers.** Although there are some strategies that differ, you will find that ESL conferences require the same ability to adapt and negotiate.
- **Clarify expectations and explain procedure.** Have conversations with second-language writers about their backgrounds, goals and processes as writers and students. They may be unfamiliar with our peer tutoring model, so be sure to discuss the writer's expectations and clarify our services at the start.
- **Set reasonable goals.** Grammatical perfection is not a reasonable expectation, but comprehensibility is.
- **Emphasize the assignment, planning, content, and organization.** If a student asks you to "just check grammar," validate their desire, and then question the writer further to find out more about their assignment, their overall plan, and other global issues you may want to address during the conference.
- **Decide whether or not the essay will be read aloud and who will read.** It may be helpful for an "ear" learner to hear you read the essay out loud. It may also be beneficial for an "eye" learner to see grammatical errors on the page. If you decide that hearing the essay may not be helpful for the student, consider reading it silently to yourself.
- **Ignore mistakes that do not interfere with comprehension.** In early drafts, it may be helpful to read through language mistakes that do not severely obscure meaning. Read the text as its written, but read naturally through minor errors.
- **Address language related issues that seriously interfere with your understanding.** Stop reading and identify the problem or mark the text so you can return to it after you've finished reading. If you stop, ask the writer for clarification, asking broad questions ("Tell me more about this idea"). Try to recast the student's explanation more grammatically or clearly ("So you're saying that..."). If you've understood correctly, the student can make a note of how you've expressed it thought in grammatical English. You and the writer should work together to negotiate the meaning of the passage and arrive at a grammatical expression of it.
- **Emphasize proofreading and editing strategies for language related issues.** When you narrow the focus to local concerns, make sure to ask several questions: *What do you normally have trouble with? How do you proofread? What are specifically concerned about in this draft?* Strive to make the process as collaborative as possible: ask them to identify areas they're unsure about, or underline all mistakes in a passage with out correcting them and have the student go through and correct as much as they can alone. The goal is to make them better editors of their own work.
- **Rely on writing center resources.** You are not expected to be an expert on grammar or usage; admit it when you don't know something and enlist the student's help in using reference books.

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